

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

**The Role of Social Media in
Police-Community Relations**

**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

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February 2019**

ABSTRACT

Social media. These two words evoke different thoughts in everyone; some positive and for others, clearly negative. No matter what the personal feelings are towards social media, the fact remains that it has become an integral part of modern life. From Facebook to Twitter, young to old, male to female, and every demographic across the country, approximately 81% of people utilize social media ("Percentage," n.d.).

Law enforcement can no longer rely on print and local television to disseminate their message. To keep with current social and technological trends, law enforcement agencies should use social media to communicate with the communities they serve. If an agency is active on social media, it has a chance to quickly and accurately provide information and other communications directly to a large percentage of the population. These communications can be simple general information or a plea for help to solve criminal offenses.

Agencies can show true transparency to their communities by putting out information about successes and failures via social media. At times, it seems the media attack officers and agencies for mistakes, especially when the agency attempts to keep them quiet. With social media, an agency can get in front of the issues and set the tone of the narrative of the incident before others can be negative and accusatory.

By using social media in the previous manner, an agency can build and improve relationships with their communities. Once the public sees a true commitment to open and honest communication, they can truly trust their law enforcement agency. With that trust, every agency can undoubtedly see great success.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a major source of information for a vast number of people over the past decade. Brainard and Edlins (2015) defined social media as a generally web-based technology allowing social interaction and creation of content by any person who belongs to a site. This social interaction comes in many forms such as networking and collaboration. Many law enforcement agencies have adopted social media to some degree but of those, some fail to reach the full potential of the platform. Use of social media makes it possible for a law enforcement agency to disseminate information quickly to a large base. With this in mind, agencies can further use this platform to drive the narrative of the activities of the agency, especially when referencing more socially debated topics. Not only does this allow the agency to set the tone, but it allows for open, two-way communication between the agency and the citizens served by that agency.

News and information is consumed and disseminated differently today. The need to be first quite often outweighs the need to be correct (Strandberg, 2014). Law enforcement agencies have the ability to get ahead of this need and provide fast, accurate information about events in their jurisdiction. This includes the negative aspects as well. An agency has the ability to recognize a mistake, make that mistake public, and then provide a solution or plan to correct the error. This open, transparent communication can only improve relations with the community and provide for increased trust in the agency. In a study by Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer (2015), they found that even Twitter, a much lesser used social media platform, appeared to strengthen perceived police legitimacy.

Many law enforcement agencies have found great success in communicating with their populous as well as the media with the use of various social media platforms. According to Strandberg (2014), some agencies no longer need to email and fax news outlets to let them know about a story because these outlets have already observed the information on social media and in turn, reach out to the agency for more information. For these reasons, as well as others, law enforcement agencies should use social media to communicate with the communities they serve.

POSITION

Law enforcement agencies should utilize social media to communicate with their respective communities for several reasons, the first of which is the fast and accurate dissemination of information. An agency with an active social media program has the ability to immediately forward important information to its citizenry as soon as the information is discovered. This does not refer to emergency communication per se, but clearly includes crime information, suspect information, public events and a vast array of other topics. Harkins (2016), who is the vice president of campus safety and security at the University of Texas at Austin, recognizes text messaging and Twitter as the fastest means of providing information to approximately 70,000 individuals associated with the campus.

In December of 2017 the population of the United States on January 1, 2018, was estimated to be 326,971,407 ("Census Bureau projects," 2017) and of this number, it is estimated that 81% utilize social media ("Percentage," n.d.). Simple math then reveals that approximately 264,846,840 Americans can be reached through social media provided the audience is engaged. Realistically, no agency will reach that many

people, nor would they need to. If an agency builds a social media program and actively engages the community, one can assert that approximately 81% of the population of the jurisdiction could be reached in a very short amount of time. This provides the opportunity to disseminate accurate information to a large audience very quickly.

This point was proven by Boston Police Department in April 2013 during the Boston Marathon bombing incident. On April 17, 2013 CNN reported and “Tweeted” inaccurate information regarding an arrest being made in the case. Boston Police Department utilized Twitter as well to report that in fact, no arrest had been made. This was retweeted nearly 11,000 times and CNN retracted its report (Davis, Alves, & Sklansky, 2014).

A second reason law enforcement agencies should utilize social media to communicate with their communities is to promote and increase transparency and accountability of the agency. Transparency can also be viewed as civilian oversight as discussed by Espejo (2014). Many citizens desire to be involved with police discipline and oversight because they feel there is no legitimate way police can police themselves because of the culture of support for other officers. Social media can bridge this gap to some degree and provide the community with information and perceived oversight in the agency that serves them.

Obviously, agencies will not publish every officer investigation to social media, but they can certainly directly address the incidents that are put out there by others. Across the country every day, citizens post to social media about how they were treated poorly or received poor service from an officer. If a law enforcement agency monitors

this type of activity they can directly address the issue, publically and with correct information. This can help dispel the rumors that develop when social media posts such as this get started. An agency need not provide full details but can certainly provide a “Readers Digest” version for the public to consume. Many agencies have gone so far as to post body worn camera video or other video to refute claims of misconduct. By directly and empirically refuting the claim, an agency can drive the narrative in a positive direction for the agency all while providing transparency to the community.

Social media may also be used to confirm misconduct. While it is not always easy to admit a mistake, especially publically, doing so shows operational transparency and allows a community to see their law enforcement agency holding their own accountable for behavior. This idea can be used to address acute misconduct by an individual or even a procedural/operational mistake by an agency. An example of this would be if an officer is rude to a civilian on a traffic stop and the civilian posts to social media about the negative contact either generally or directly to an agency’s social media page. An agency would be wise to address this issue on the same public forum, leaving names out, and publish the findings to the same thread. If the officer is guilty of misconduct, an agency should openly admit this fact and state what has or will be done for corrective measures. In a second example, an agency which was responsible for rerouting of traffic for a parade made logistical errors and caused serious traffic problems. As soon as practical, this agency needs to publish to social media very plainly, they made a mistake as well as what the agency learned and how they will address this in the future to ensure this mistake does not happen again. By getting ahead of the general public and openly admitting the error, this will negate, though not

completely, the effect of negative social media posts about the incident and display the willingness of the agency to be open and honest about mistakes as well as successes (R. Johnson, personal communication, January 18th, 2018).

Agencies hold their employees to a known standard, and social media can allow a community to hold their law enforcement agency to that standard and keep them accountable for digressing from it. Governing bodies, i.e. city councils, typically hold regular meeting with open forums where citizens can come speak to address concerns or commendations. Going to these meetings takes time away from other activities of the busy lifestyles in each community but sending a message directly to an agency via social media takes only moments and can be done from a smart phone or computer, allowing the user to communicate the message while doing other activities.

An agency can choose to correspond openly or more directly in a private message with the sender.

These ideas lead directly to improving community relations, which is a third reason law enforcement agencies should use social media to communicate with its citizens. Studies have revealed that people who interact with their respective law enforcement agencies via social media have a higher level of confidence and greater overall satisfaction with the agencies (Ruddell, & Jones, 2013). The effects of social media are greater with the younger population while people over 65 are generally much less affected. If a citizen has confidence in his or her police agency, human nature dictates that communication will be more open and honest, enhancing the relationship. Several ideas are encompassed in community relations according to Espejo (2014), but the primary point is tailoring police services based on the needs of the community

through ongoing communication. Social media is simply another means of this communication allowing members of the community to voice their needs on a jurisdiction wide basis all the way down to the individual. This relationship between the police and the community is correlated to the concept of community policing.

Community policing is a generally pervasive theory in law enforcement today and many agencies use it as an operational model. Community policing is based on communication and relationships with the community but the demands on modern police make it difficult for most street level officers to truly have one-on-one time with individuals in the community (R. Johnson, personal communication, January 18th, 2018). Social media provides a great many of those individuals with a means to have that conversation and potentially elicit a greater response from the agency i.e. town hall or other type directed community meetings. As these relationships are built and strengthened, the law enforcement agency can learn how to better serve the community as they are more willing to have open, honest conversation about the needs and wants of the community.

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

While use of social media by law enforcement agencies has clear benefits, there remain some issues to address. Some may argue that the older generation is generally less engaged on social media than others. According to a study by Ruddell and Jones (2013), respondents over 65 years of age rarely accessed social media and saw little to no future in its use. This fact is directly refuted in an article by Kamiel (2016) that cites internet use by senior citizens increasing by 150% between 2009 and 2011 with 34% of internet users utilizing social media. Many members of the older generation have begun

utilizing social media, especially Facebook, to communicate with family members and have found a distinct usefulness in the platform to obtain other information.

With a rise in computer classes at senior centers, the realization that the use of social media can help combat loneliness in homebound seniors and a correlation between internet/social media use and improved health and mental function, there is no doubt law enforcement agencies will continue to see a rise in senior participants in their social media platforms (Kamiel, 2016). Police agencies should not replace other forms of communication like newspaper articles and press releases with the use of social media, but they should certainly supplement these standard communication platforms with the use of social media.

A second argument against law enforcement agencies using social media to communicate with their communities is the increased open record liabilities (Scarinci, 2015). This is certainly true, but the key is in how the law enforcement agency chooses to handle these situations. The correspondence contained within the social media accounts of a law enforcement agency is considered part of the open records act, including comments from people outside the agency. Most police agencies allow for negative communications and will only delete comments from others when they are profane or abusive and clearly violate the terms of use. While this practice is acceptable, the agency is still responsible to maintain a record of the deleted comments. This record keeping can be difficult since social media sites are maintained by a third party. It then becomes the responsibility of the law enforcement agency to maintain this deleted information. The solution is simple and is also discussed by Scarinci (2015).

It is essential for law enforcement agencies to develop policies to guide the use of social media by the agency and its representatives. These policies should also clearly contain directives on how to retain information that will not be maintained by the third party. Some simple solutions are screen shots of the communication, hard copy print outs, or computerized screen capture. Once the policy is in place for how the agency will maintain the records, then it is up to the social media team to adhere to the policy and continually review it for better or more efficient methods of record retention.

RECOMMENDATION

Police agencies should begin to see the benefit to using social media to communicate with the people they serve for many reasons. The open, public correspondence allows for quick dissemination of valuable information and the additional sharing of this information by the parties who have viewed it. There are numerous social media platforms in use today with the most effective appearing to be Facebook and Twitter. A law enforcement agency can utilize these platforms to communicate a wide variety of information from important to simple “feel good” things like officers interacting with the public in a positive way. While some would argue that the older generation is less engaged on social media and therefore would not be reached with this platform, recent research is counter to this, revealing an increased use of the internet by seniors (Kamiel, 2016).

Anecdotally, there has been some success of the Corsicana, Texas police department in the use of social media. This agency has begun to put everything from success to failure on social media, affording the community the opportunity to weigh in. This openness of the agency and public opportunity to weigh in provided added

perceived legitimacy of the agency in the eyes of the community; this same effect was also observed in a study by Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer (2015).

The Boston Police Department also saw great success with the use of social media in the wake of the Boston Marathon bombing. The Boston Police Department was able to communicate valuable information to the public quickly and efficiently. They informed the public about the status of the investigation, asked for help, aided in calming the public, providing suspect information and even correct incorrect information publicized by major news outlets (Davis, Alves, & Sklansky, 2014).

By using social media to communicate with the community, a law enforcement agency can promote and increase transparency and accountability of the agency. Many agencies have seen the value in providing general information to the community on social media. This can be taken several steps further quite easily. A law enforcement agency would be wise to promote their positive activities like major arrests, community outreach, public events, and even simple photographs of the officers in a human capacity to emphasize the fact that there is a person behind every badge.

The agency must not stop with the positive aspects of the agency. If there is a problem or mistake, a law enforcement agency would serve itself well by driving the narrative for this mistake in a public manner by openly admitting to the mistake and showing what the agency plans to do to ensure the mistake is not made again. It is proven in human interaction that trust can be gained when others are willing to admit mistakes and show accountability for them. This is no different with a law enforcement agency. Public faith in the agency will increase when an agency shows the ability to be

accountable for its mistakes as well as successes. This open, honest communication will aid in garnering trust with the community.

By fostering a relationship with the community based on trust, transparency, and accountability, a law enforcement agency will increase the positive nature community relations which are correlated with the concept of community policing (Espejo, 2014). By enhancing the relationship between a law enforcement agency and the community, positive bonds can be formed with individuals and organizations. These bonds will allow for open and honest communication between the agency and the community, thereby allowing the agency to truly understand what the people they serve need and want. Trust is the basic foundation of any team, and without it, the team is destined to be dysfunctional and ineffective. From the foundation of trust, constructive conflict can be used to build commitment to the issues on both sides. Once all parties involved are committed to the issues, they can then hold themselves as well as each other accountable without fear of that conflict. From here, not only will the law enforcement agency be focused on results, but the community as a whole will be.

These are the fundamental aspects of team building and they apply to even the largest of teams. Once the community and law enforcers look at their relationship as a team, they will begin to see the bigger picture of the cooperative nature of police services. Police departments have historically been slow to evolve with respect to human relations and communications. Law enforcement agencies have a duty to the communities they serve to provide the highest level of service possible, and this includes means of communications. Using social media as a regular means of communication will allow any agency to effectively forward valuable information,

increase transparency and accountability and as an ultimate result, enhance the relationship with the community.

With all this information and communication, the concern of open records liabilities comes to the forefront. While it is true that an agency is responsible for maintaining this data, this can be accomplished quite efficiently with the implementation of policies and procedures to guide the use of social media by the agency (Scarinci, 2015). As long as the social media team of the agency adheres to these policies, and the agency constantly reviews the policies, success is inevitable. Upon reviewing the benefits, it becomes clear that law enforcement agencies should utilize social media to communicate with the communities they serve.

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